

**Beautiful World of the Backbenchers**  
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The most foolish description of youth is that it is rebellious. The young do wear T-shirts that say Rebel or Che or Bitch. But the truth is that the youth, especially in this country, is a fellowship of cowards. It lives in fear. Fear of life, fear of an illusory future. The perpetual trauma of the forward castes is inextricably woven into this fear. And what Arjun Singh's successful reservation campaign has denied them is the right to a secured but ordinary life, a life that comes with scoring 98 percent in the board exams, a life that goes like this: Engineer-MBA-anonymous. You can argue that this route is better than sociology-salesman-anonymous. But that will be to focus unduly on the ordinary among the cowards. The real tragedy concerns the extraordinary cowards. Great writers, painters, musicians and athletes who are lost forever to what are moronically called, 'the professional courses'. Instead of pursuing their talents they are, right now, in dark gloomy tutorials preparing for entrance exams, fatally infected by objective type questions. The angle between tangents drawn from the point (1,4) to the parabola  $y^2=4x$  is?

The angst of the types who score over 95 percent also fills me, and several lakhs like me, with wicked joy. I was the 75 percent type. It was not pleasurable to be so in Madras of the eighties. I grew up in Kodambakkam where Telugu film directors, who wore white shoes, kept their beautiful mistresses; and Anglo Indian girls in skirts, who did not have hair on their legs, and all of whom I now remember only as Maria, walked to Fatima Church. But a large part of my formative years were spent in a Brahmin housing society called Rajaram Colony where fathers were all clerks and mothers were housewives. Rare working women had the same aura as divorcees. I was special because I was a Christian, and the transitory relatives of my neighbours, when they learnt my religion, would speak to me in English.

Many of my friends were periodically thrashed with belts by their fathers when the miasmic green report cards came home. Once, I heard the cries of a boy who had scored just ninety percent in a maths monthly test. Another form of punishment was heating a stainless steel serving spoon and inflicting minor burns. It was called, 'soodu'. My parents never hit me for my marks though my report cards were inspiring. My mother beat me up occasionally for political reasons – every time her mother-in-law came visiting. Apparently, according to a rustic Malayalee way of life, thrashing the kids was a hint to the in-law that it was time to leave.

Those days, the legends of Rajaram Colony were our seniors who had entered the IITs, or as a consequence, had gone to America to study further. Their names were taken with reverence. When they visited home, they left a trail of whispers. And when they deigned to play cricket with us, we observed closely how they bowled and how they batted. Because they knew everything. It was already decided in every household, except mine, that the boys will go to IIT, a certainty just like their sisters will do BSc Nutrition. And so my friends began their furtive preparation when they were not yet thirteen. They began to score higher and higher at school. And they began to look at me as an unfortunate freak, not only because they thought they were brighter but also because I said I wanted to become a journalist. They scored better than me in English too. (Once in an English test, when asked the opposite gender of ram, almost every one in my class, astonishingly, knew the answer was ewe. I wrote, 'Sita'). I did always claim a higher creative status and often entertained the backbenchers, who were chiefly sons of illiterate parents, by calling my Brahmins friends, "curd-rice muggers".

In the school I had slowly gained a reputation as a poet and some sort of a stand-up comedian. But as I approached the 12th standard, I was not the hero anymore of the juniors. That honour drifted to a brilliant boy, the first ranker who once used to play the tabla and did not touch the

instrument anymore because he was preparing for IIT's Joint Entrance Exam. (A few years later, I would meet him on the campus of IIT Chennai. He would tell me that he will not go to America. "Because, you see, with transcendental meditation, you can sit here in Madras and visit any country in the world". He was serious. Now, he is a banker in San Francisco).

Meanwhile, in the Rajaram Colony, I observed that older Brahmin boys who had, somehow, fared poorly in the 12th standard and had to suffer the humiliation of pursuing BSc walked in the perpetual mist of guilt and embarrassment. They took to smoking and drinking, and 'sighting' – the disreputable art of looking at girls. They stared at a future in Eureka Forbes.

I eventually moved out of the Colony to another such fiendish place but kept in touch with my childhood friends. The distance between us, however, grew. They did not really want to see me. I was a distraction in their preparation "for life". There was nothing they could talk to me about, nothing they could share, like their latest JEE sample test scores or the traits of the teachers at Brilliant Tutorials. On my part, I began to find them unhappy and bleak. Once, they were fresh and eager. Like me, they wanted to play cricket for India. Some were interested in music, some even attempted novels. Now, they were zombies in the trance of a whole material world that was just one entrance exam away.

Eventually, almost all of them scored in the high nineties in the 12th standard exams. One made it to the IIT. The others prepared to go to second rung engineering colleges in humid melancholic towns. But they still thought they were more victorious than me because I had got 75%, a misfortune that their parents could not believe would visit someone who had two hands and one head. Worse, I told them that I was going to do a BA in English Literature. At that time, people did not think you were gay because you wanted to do literature. But they still did not understand why a male would do such a thing. They asked me if I was alright, if I could reconsider, if some maternal ornaments could be sold for the good cause of capitation fee.

Some days, I think of those boys from another time. They are mostly bankers in America now and, I imagine, partly responsible for the subprime crisis. They are in the glow of the life that they had so dearly sought. But somehow I feel that their sisters, who eventually pursued what they wanted to, have more interesting lives. Also, occasionally I hear that some IITian or the other is returning to the art that he had originally loved. And is making up for the time he has lost because he could crack the toughest questions in the world but could not answer in time the class teacher's annual question, "What do you want to become in life?"